East Ross Settlement Landscape Capacity Study

A technical report prepared on behalf of

the Highland Council and
Scottish Natural Heritage

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Contents

Turnbull Jeffrey Partnership, with Michael Wood Landscape Architect as a subconsultant, was commissioned by The Highland Council (THC) and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to undertake a Landscape Capacity Study for the Ross and Cromarty East Local Plan Area.

This study is one of several parallel technical reports being prepared to assist in identifying sites for housing and industry for the new Ross and Cromarty East Local Plan.

Landscape capacity is defined as the ability of an area to accommodate a defined type of development without unacceptable adverse effects on landscape character.

The development definition for this study was between 2800 and 3800 houses at a density of 10 units per Hectare (i.e. between 280Ha - and 380Ha) and 20Ha of industrial/commerical land.

The purpose of the study is to establish:

> *Where can such development lest be located in Easter Ross while meeting two specific key objectives of the planning system:*
> - *the maintenance of the cultural heritage, including landscape, and*
> - *the quality of the environment (ensuring that the interests of the landscape itself and the people living and working within it are addressed)?*

A methodology was developed based on existing guidance and the flow chart adjacent outlines this methodology.

The report presents the results of the study in two sections:

Landscape Characterisation
which desribes and illustrates the Local Landscape Character Types for each settlement and highlights the key charactreistics to which development should relate: this information could form the basis of future studies.

Recommendations
which highlights the sensitivities of landscape characteristics to this type of development and provides guidance on how this may be achieved.

The study has identified over 450 Hectares of land which has landscape capacity for development of housing. Of this total area, over one third would be suitable also for industrial development and three individual suitable sites which have areas in excess of 20Ha have been identified.

DEFINE AREA OF SEARCH PREPARE MAPS OF INDIVIDUAL SEARCH AREAS FOR EACH SETTLEMENT

▼

CHARACTERISE LANDSCAPE WITHIN AREAS OF SEARCH

▼

NEW SUBDIVIDED LOCAL LANDSCAPE CHARACTER TYPES AT DETAILED SCALE/ IDENTIFY KEY CHARACTERISTICS

▼

DEFINE DEVELOPMENT TYPE(S) DEFINE CHARACTERISTICS SENSITIVE TO DEVELOPMENT TYPE(S) (RURAL AND SETTLEMENT CRITERIA)

▼

IDENTIFY AREAS WITHIN SEARCH AREA WHICH HAVE THE CAPACITY TO ACCOMMODATE DEVELOPMENT/TEST AGAINST CRITERIA/IDENTIFY INTERVENTION MEASURES AND GUIDANCE

▼

COMPARE WITH EXISTING LOCAL PLANS AND OMIT PREVIOUSLY ALLOCATED SITES FROM CALCULATIONS

▼

MAP OF PREFERRED AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN EACH SETTLEMENT WITH SUPPORTING TABLES

The spread of these sites over the twenty two settlement areas is quite uneven with some settlements, such as North Kessock and Munlochy, having very little landscape capacity for expansion while others, such as Dingwall, Tain, Alness and Invergordon, have considerable landscape capacity for new development.

Some of the sites identified may not be taken forward into the Local Plan for reasons of unsuitability relating to other technical issues such as infrastructure capacity, technical feasibility and flood risk.

Removal of some sites for these reasons may result in an under provision of sites and it may be that a further search will be required to identify sites over a wider search area.

For many of the sites which are taken forward to the Local Plan it will be essential to prepare detailed design briefs to ensure that the outline guidance provided in this document is developed further in relation to site specific issues and is interpreted correctly to result in new development making a positive contribution to the settlement frameworks existing.

Some of the sites identified are so large that it will be crucial to prepare masterplans to ensure that, if developed incremntally, an overall vision is achieved. In some circumstances a number of sites exist in close proximity to each other and, again, masterplans should be prepared for these.

Preface

Turnbull Jeffrey Partnership (TJP) was commissioned by The Highland Council (THC) and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) in November 2000 to undertake a landscape capacity study for twenty two settlements in Easter Ross. TJP appointed Michael Wood, Landscape Architect as a consultant to the study team.

The landscape capacity study is one of several technical reports being prepared to assist in the preparation of the housing and industrial allocations within the Ross and Cromarty East Local Plan. The Deposit Structure Plan requires the Local Plan to allocate land for 6300 houses and 20Ha of Industrial Land between 1998 and 2017.

Existing Local Plans have allocated sites for some 2500 – 3500 houses and the focus of this study has been to identify, purely from the point of view of landscape capacity (which is defined as being the ability of the landscape to accommodate development without unacceptable adverse effects on the charcter of the landscape), possible locations for 2800 – 3800 houses as well as 20Ha of industrial land. This report describes and illustrates the process involved in assessing the capacity of the landscapes around the twenty two setllements to accommodate development of the type envisaged.

It should be appreciated that although this study presents sites which are considered to have landscape capacity to accommodate new development in terms of landscape character issues there may be other constraints on their development. Similarly sites which have not been identified in this report as having landscape capacity may well be included in the Local Plan due to their being considered suitable for development for other reasons.

Introduction

Background

Landscape is continually changing in response to natural and man-made forces. As in other parts of Scotland, the Highland landscape has in the past been subject to the relentless forces of geology and climate, and has continued to evolve as human adaptations have modified its fundamental patterns of landform and landcover. Current development pressures in The Highland Council area require that sites for new housing and industry be found, in locations where people want to live and work and where industry can operate profitably and efficiently. It is vital that sites which can accommodate such development are found and that the identification process takes account of issues such as infrastructure capacity, technical feasibility, proximity to existing community services and the character and quality of the environment.

The Planning System is the mechanism used to attempt to balance these of different requirements. Within the framework The Highland Structure Plan, currently on Deposit with the Scottish Ministers, the Ross and Cromarty East Local Plan (RACELP) is required to allocate land for 6300 houses and 20 hectares of industrial land. This report has been commissioned to help inform the challenging search process, examining the areas around the settlements solely from the perspective of landscape, and is one of several parallel technical studies which will ultimately be taken into account in selecting sites to be included in the Local Plan.

Prior allocation of sites for between 2500-3500 houses has been made in existing Local Plan areas. This report is not required to review these allocations and therefore concentrates on the search for sites for the remaining 2800-3800 houses, together with the additional 20 hectares of industrial land. It is anticipated that the requirement for these sites can be met principally by the expansion of existing settlements, (specifically the settlements named by the Highland Council in the Appendix to the Consultant's Brief), and the study accordingly focuses on these. The location of these settlements is illustrated on Figure A.

The study has been undertaken within the specific context provided by the national programme of assessment of Landscape Character Assessments (LCAs), initiated by Scottish Natural Heritage in 1994. Under this programme, the study area is covered by two existing reports, namely the Inner Moray Firth Landscape Character Assessment, and the Ross and Cromarty Landscape Character Assessment. The Highland Council and

the Local Enterprise Companies were represented on the Steering Groups of both the Inner Moray Firth and Ross and Cromarty LCAs. These documents constitute a sound starting point for the current investigation, not only describing and classifying the landscape at a regional level, but also giving broad initial guidance on capacity to accommodate specific development types.

FIGURE A: LOCATION OF SETTLEMENTS

Purposes of Study

This study is one of several technical reports being prepared to assist the Highland Council in identifying appropriate sites for residential and industrial development to meet future demand.

In simple terms, the purpose of the study is to determine where it might be best to site the required new housing and industry in the interests of the landscape - to find the best "landscape fit" for the development. Its aim is therefore essentially pragmatic, to solve a problem which may be stated more explicitly as follows:

> *Where can land for 2800-3800 houses and 20 hectares of industrial land best be located in Easter Ross while meeting two specific key objectives of the planning system:*
> - *the maintenance of the cultural heritage, including landscape, and*
> - *the quality of the environment (ensuring that the interests of the landscape itself and the people living and working within it are addressed)?*

In addressing this problem, the consultants were required to adopt an approach based on evaluation of landscape capacity, defined as "…the amount of change of a particular type which a landscape can accept without adverse effects on landscape character" . Using these more technical terms, the purpose of the study can therefore be described more precisely as being :

> ***to identify sites which have the landscape capacity to acommodate the required development without unacceptable[1] adverse effects on landscape character.***

The Client's detailed terms of reference for the study amplify this requirement and state four detailed objectives of the study in order of priority:

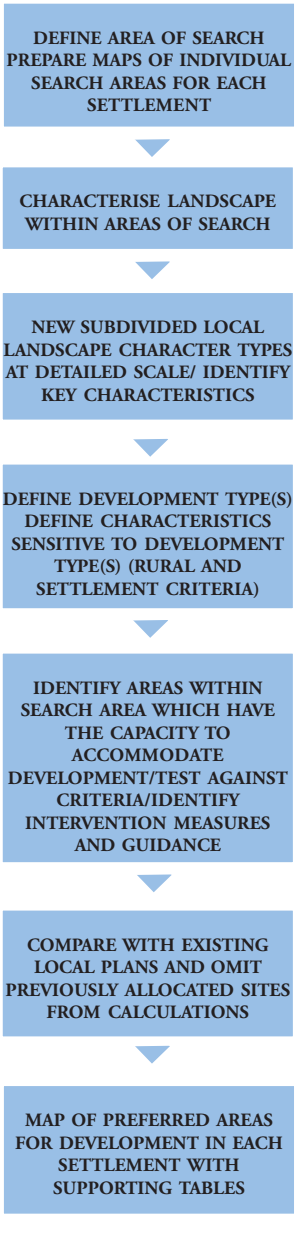
1. To evaluate the landscape capacity of particular target areas (the chosen settlements) including the identification of key landscape resources for protection/enhancement.

2. To identify the optimum phasing of preferred development options, in landscape terms.

3. To identify areas where development should be discouraged.

4. To identify areas where planting /other landscape enhancement could be undertaken in the short term to enable future longer-term development.

[1] This qualification is intentionally stressed. In many instances the introduction of housing or industrial development will have some adverse effect. Judgement of what constitutes an acceptable or unacceptable adverse effect is at the crux of the study and ultimately reflects the professional opinion of the consultant.



Methodology

The text below in conjunction with the flowchart on the right gives a description of the methodology for the study. It should be noted that the'baseline' for the study was taken as 'today' and that future development in the form of buildings on sites already allocated in the existing Local Plans has not been taken into account. Similarly other potential landscape changes (including felling, restructuring and restocking of forestry areas) which may or may not occur have not been considered.

Definition of "areas of search"/study areas

Base maps at 1:10000 scale were prepared from digital information provided by The Highland Council. Individual map sheets for each of the 22 settlements were used to define the area of search by including, as a minimum, an area of radius 1km measured from the centre of the settlement (as an estimate of the limit of comfortable walking distance to existing community facilities). This was then extended to ensure that the immediate landscape setting of the existing settlements would be illustrated on the final maps.

Characterisation of Landscape

Each of the twenty two search areas was visited and the landscape within each map sheet area was described and classified using the recognised landscape assessment techniques recorded in "Interim Landscape Assessment Guidance". This resulted in the subdivision of the Landscape Character Types described in the existing Inner Moray Firth Landscape Assessment and Ross and Cromarty reports into new, more detailed Local Landscape Character Types, representing a lower hierarchical level of classification. It was considered crucial at this scale that the new units also included detailed treatment of the settlements themselves, and a method of characterising settlement areas/townscapes was developed based on the existing guidance. The Local Landscape Character Types are illustrated on Figures 1a to 20a.

As an integral part of the process, the Key Characteristics of each of the new, rural, Local Landscape Character Types and the Key Characteristics of each of the new, settlement, Local Landscape Character Types were identified and described.

Define Development Type(s)

In order to assess the capacity of areas to accommodate change in the form of residential development it was necessary to establish a 'baseline' density . It was agreed that this should be 10 units per hectare which Highland Council confirmed was a typical density for the region For

industrial development, it was assumed that this would take the form of small scale, single storey units typically of no more than 200 square metres.

Sensitivity Criteria

The concept of Landscape Sensitivity is closely related to Landscape Capacity, describing "the degree to which a particular landscape can accommodate change without unacceptable detrimental effects on landscape character." Sensitivity is not however absolute - it can only be defined in relation to the particular type of change which is being evaluated, in this case, housing and industry. By comparing the characteristics of the landscape (one of the outputs of the characterisation process noted above), with the characteristics of the development, in a process analogous to Environmental Impact Assessment, broad criteria which measure/indicate sensitivity were identified.

Two categories of criteria were recognised: rural criteria and settlement criteria.

Rural Criteria

- *Vegetation: the presence of existing woodland, forestry, broad shelterbelts and, to a lesser extent , narrow shelterbelts, copses, hedgerows and hedgerow trees (on the basis that such features may provide boundary screening or may serve to break up the apparent density of development); and*

- *Visibility including visibility from major routes and settlement edges, and the presence of other obstacles to views such as existing adjacent built development, drystone walls, etc;*

- *Topography: the complexity of landforms and amplitude of relief in relation to their ability to accommodate built development of the relevant scale and density so that it appears to fit and integrate with the surroundings.*

Settlement criteria

- *The historic pattern, or grain, of development giving an indication of why the settlements were established and how this development reflected a natural response to physical constraints and cultural influences at that time. Understanding this pattern assists in determining whether development of the type envisaged might be appropriate in terms of the essential character of the settlement 'core' or whether a different form of development might be more appropriate; and*

- *The present day pattern of development or how the settlements have evolved from the 'original' core to result in their appearance today. Appreciation of the existing pattern helps in determining whether the specific type of development might be appropriate in relation to the character of the settlement as a whole.*

Identification of Landscape Capacity

Taking into account both categories of criteria described above, the setllements were revisited with the aim of identifying, through professional judgement, specific sites with the landscape capacity to accommodate the types of development envisaged.

The sites identified were then tested against the broad sensitivity criteria and it was established that, for each site, each criteria had different levels of influence on the landscape capacity to accommodate the development types.. For example, for some settlements the overriding criteria influencing the capacity to accommodate change of the type(s) proposed was a complex, undulating topography whereas for others the presence of existing vegetation overlying a relatively simple landform was the dominant influence on the capacity to accommodate change. Sensitivity may determine whether there is capacity for development of the type(s) envisaged, it may indicate any advance intervention required to ensure future capacity and it may also determine if development of a different density may be accommodated.

Testing against the rural and settlement criteria also assisted in the identification of guidance and opportunities for enhancement.

'Natural boundaries', which may be formed by vegetation, topographical and other features, or a combination of these, and which may also be suggested by the existing pattern of built development in the form of apparent entrances to settlements, have also been taken into consideration and these 'natural boundaries' are highlighted in the Landscape Capacity tables by reference to, for example, 'perceived edge of settlement' or 'perceived natural edge of development'.

In some circumstances sites were identified which have the potential to accommodate development of a higher density and others were considered to have the ability to accommodate residential development but not at the density of 10 units per hectare. These sites are identified in the Landscape Capacity Tables with differeing density references being, broadly:

low density < 8 per Ha
high density > 12 per Ha

In addition, some sites were considered to have the potential to accommodate development in the future on condition that certain forms of advance intervention be undertaken. Generally advance intervention would require to be undertaken at the earliest date subsequent to the publication of the Local Plan and would be likely to have developed the capacity to accommodate development towards the end of the period refereed to in the Brief (i.e. 2017).

Comparison with Existing Local Plans

The resulting sites represented the draft preferred areas for development in landscape terms with the baseline of the character of the landscape being 'today', i.e. the date of survey. Before preparing the Landscape Capacity Map for each settlement, the draft sites were compared with the Easter Ross, Mid Ross, Black Isle (Alteration 2) and Invergordon Local Plan Proposals and the areas already allocated were omitted from the approximate estimates of identified site areas. These estimates were undertaken simply to gain an appreciation of whether a sufficient total area had been identified to meet the requirements of the brief.

Landscape Capacity Maps and Tables

The Landscape Capacity Maps (Figures 1b – 20b) show the sites allocated in the existing Local Plans together with the preferred development sites identified by this study and where these overlap. These maps are supported by tables which state the sensitivity criteria influencing the capcity of each site to accommodate development for each site, together with proposals to meet the subsidiary objectives included in the brief as follows:

- Priority Rating: definition of the optimum phasing of development with respect to landscape. Sites were given a priority rating relative to each settlement with 1 being the site recommended for development first; sites which require advance intervention have a low priority. The priority ratings have no timescale ascribed to them and are simply an indication of the order in which sites would best be developed solely from a landscape point of view.

- Identification of areas where development should be discouraged;

- Identification of areas where development could occur only with advance intervention;

- Identification of areas which could also accommodate industrial development;

- Guidance relating to density (where it is considered that the 'baseline' density of 10 houses per Ha would be inappropriate) and to the layout, form and scale of development (where it is considered that these factors will be crucial to the capacity of the site to accommodate development). Such outline guidance is not provided for every site and it will be a matter for The Highland Council to establish detailed design briefs for those sites which are included in the finalised Local Plan; and

- Outline proposals to enhance the landscape in advance of longer-term development, including advance planting or other landscape design or landscape management measures which would mitigate the effect of subsequent development.

In addition, sites which require detailed development briefs to ensure that outline guidance is interpreted correctly are identified by the symbol '**' in the first column of the capacity tables. Similarly, sites which require a development masterplan have also been highlighted in the guidance text.

As part of the study the consultants presented interim findings to a number of local councillors. This excercise was intended to both assist the councillors in understanding the process involved in the study and to help inform the study of the range of landscape issues from the perspective of local people.

Structure of Report

Following this introduction, the main body of the document is structured as follows:

Landscape Characterisation

- Background;
- Description of Local Landscape Character Types including photos and Key Characteristics); and
- Landscape Character Map.

Recommendations

- Landscape Capacity Map showing Preferred Sites;
- Approximate total areas identified (less areas already allocated in the existing local plan) ; and
- Table to support text with notes on sensitivity criteria, advance intervention, priority rating, guidance notes, opportunities for enhancement, areas where development should be discouraged and areas which could accommodate industrial development.

Appendix 1 contains the field survey sheets and is bound as a separate document.